District Attorney Garrison: Who were the real plotters in New Orleans?

THE JFK 'CONSPIRACY'

What lies behind New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's increasingly notorious investigation of a "plot" to kill John F. Kennedy? To find out, NEWSWEEK *sent a veteran reporter, who covered the assassination and its aftermath, to New Orleans for five weeks. His account follows.*

by Hugh Aynesworth

Jim Garrison is right. There has been a conspiracy in New Orleans—but it is a plot of Garrison's own making. It is a scheme to concoct a fantastic "solution" to the death of John F. Kennedy, and to make it stick; in this cause, the district attorney and his staff have been indirect parties to the death of one man and have humiliated, harassed and financially gutted several others.

Indeed, Garrison's tactics have been even more questionable than his case. I have evidence that one of the strapping D.A.'s investigators offered an unwilling "witness" $3,000 and a job with an airline—if only he would "fill in the facts" of an alleged meeting to plot the death of the President. I also know that when the D.A.'s office learned that this entire bribery attempt had been tape-recorded, two of Garrison's men returned to the "witness" and, he says, threatened him with physical harm.

Another man who spent many hours with District Attorney Garrison in a vain attempt to dissuade him from his assassination-conspiracy theory has twice been threatened—once by one of the D.A.'s own "witnesses," the second time by Garrison himself. Others—Cuban exiles, convicts, drug addicts, homosexuals, bums—have been hounded in more subtle ways. For most of Garrison's victims are extremely vulnerable men. Some are already paying for their vulnerability. Chief among them is Clay L. Shaw, the New Orleans businessman-socialite, who now faces trial on a charge of conspiring to kill the President.

How did it all begin?

Garrison first became earnestly interested in the Kennedy assassination when he and Louisiana Sen. Russell Long rode side by side on an airplane bound for New York. Long said he had never actually believed the Warren commission report, that he still had doubts. Garrison later told me that he immediately decided that if such an important man thought there was something odd about the case, it was time to start digging.

Cleanup: Garrison is known in New Orleans as a smart operator, a bit unorthodox, but nobody's fool. He made his name by cleaning up his old haunt—the French Quarter—and putting a temporary halt to B-girl practices and lewd dancing in its gaudy strip joints. Later, he amazed the whole city by accusing eight criminal judges of taking too many days off and of winking at Mafia activity. But although the judges sued him for libel, Garrison's right to criticize the judiciary was finally upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court. Thus, when he first announced his "conspiracy" case, most New Orleanians believed that "Big Jim must have something."

What Garrison had to start with was a colorfully pathetic "suspect" named David Ferrie. A onetime airline pilot, Ferrie had been questioned shortly after the

assassination on the basis of a tip that he was Oswald's "getaway pilot." But the tipster was an alcoholic who later admitted that he had made up the story.

Despite his clean bill of health from the FBI and Secret Service, Ferrie became the center of Garrison's investigation. He was questioned for hours, "tailed" and subjected to polygraph tests. His acquaintances were quizzed. By February, word had leaked out of Garrison's office that Ferrie was soon to be arrested and charged with the conspiracy of conspiracies. Through it all Ferrie called the D.A.'s investigation a "farce" and told friends he would sue Garrison if he were arrested. But as the weeks wore on, Ferrie, not a strong or stable man under the best of circumstances, began to show the strain. Then, suddenly on Feb. 22, he died—of a massive cerebral hemorrhage.

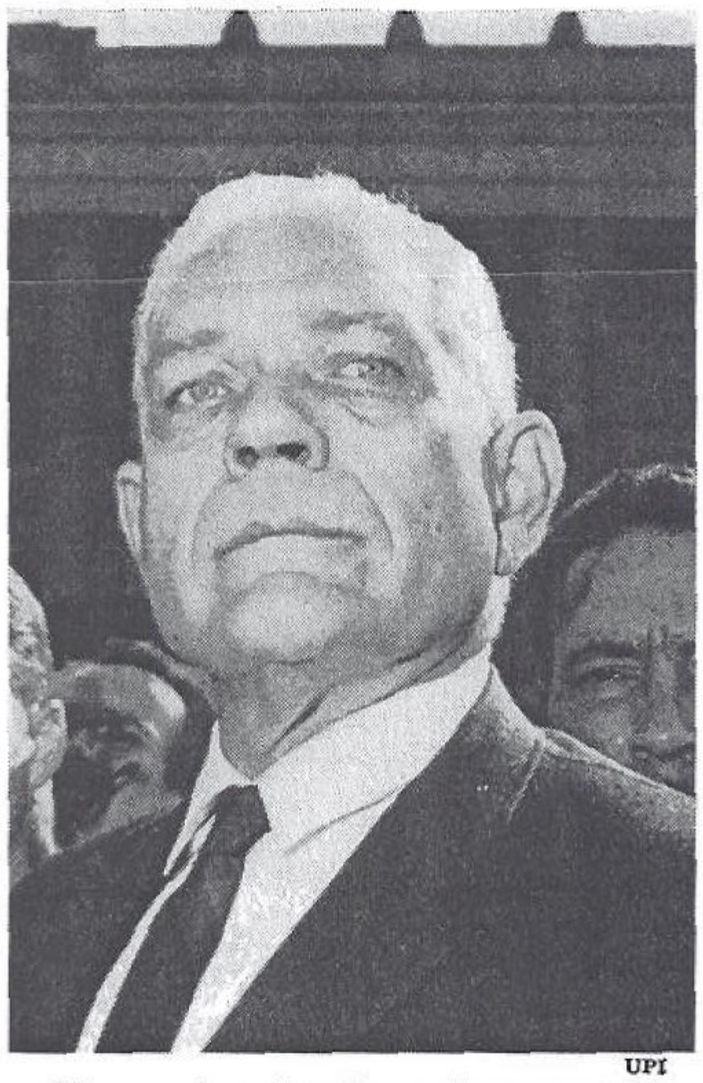
Suicide: Garrison crowed that Ferrie's death was "an apparent suicide" and he warned that same week: "We know who the rest of them are. The only way they are going to get away from us is to kill themselves." A week after Ferrie's death, Garrison ruefully admitted to me in his home, "Yeah, we helped kill the son of a bitch."

Shortly after Ferrie's fortuitous death, Garrison proclaimed that he had "solved" the President's assassination; that he knew the individuals involved, the cities and other details of the "plot." Arrests would be forthcoming, and convictions too. "Don't bet against us," the district attorney warned.

Two days later, a crucial "witness" miraculously appeared. Perry Raymond Russo, a 25-year-old insurance salesman from nearby Baton Rouge, claimed that he had known David Ferrie well and that Ferrie had once said President Kennedy should have been killed for his bungling of the Bay of Pigs disaster. Garrison assigned former boxer Andrew J. Sciambra, 31, one year out of law school, to interview Russo. After his first conversation with Russo, Sciambra filed a 3,500-word memo in which he failed to mention anything about an assassination plot.

Ideal Witness: But later, after being given "truth serum" (sodium pentothal) and being prompted, Russo testified at length in a pretrial hearing about a key "conspiracy" meeting held in Ferrie's apartment which also supposedly involved Clay Shaw and Lee Harvey Oswald. Russo seemed to be the ideal witness. He was cool, calm—"almost as if he was hypnotized," said one attorney. Lo and behold, the defense later discovered that Russo *had* been hypnotized—just hours before he testified. Russo told the court he had stood around in the apartment and listened while Ferrie, Oswald and Shaw hatched their "plot." He could recall phrases like "availability of exits," "diversionary tactics," and "triangulation of cross fire." Russo offered a variety of unconvincing reasons why he had never mentioned the meeting to anyone before.

Garrison produced another unusual "witness" at the hearing, a 27-year-old Negro drug addict. Vernon Bundy said that while sitting on the lakefront one morning waiting to "pop" a cap of heroin he looked up and saw Oswald being handed a wad of money by Shaw. Bundy admitted he had a four-cap-a-day habit at that time and had been on drugs since the age of 13. One defense attorney asked Bundy how he could support such a demanding heroin habit when the cost would be nearly twice his salary each week. "I steal sometimes," Bundy replied.



UPI

Shaw: A price for vulnerability

After the three judges on the hearing panel agreed that the Russo and Bundy testimony was enough "evidence" to bind Shaw over for trial, one judge told a friend at the racetrack that although Garrison really didn't have enough to bind the defendant over, he and his fellow judges had been fascinated by how well Russo stuck to his story for two days. Many hypnotists probably were not so impressed.

Garrison did not stop with Russo and Bundy. His men tried to get another "witness" to shore up his conspiracy charge. In fact, they tried about $3,000 worth.

Less than a week before Shaw's pretrial hearing, two investigators from Garrison's office visited an unemployed young man named Alvin Beaubouef at his New Orleans home. They told the 21-year-old they had "influence" and could help Beaubouef get a job with an airline if only he would help them substantiate the alleged plot. Beaubouef told them he couldn't do anything without talking to his attorney. They made a date for 2:30 the next afternoon at the lawyer's office.

'Just Like That': One of the two investigators, Lynn Loisel, a New Orleans policeman assigned to Garrison's office, showed up. What had Loisel told Beaubouef the night before, the attorney asked? "I told him we had liberal expense money," Loisel replied. "And I said the boss is in a position to put him in a job, also that he would make a hero out of him, instead of a villain, you understand . . . I mean we can change the story around, you know, to positively, beyond a shadow of a doubt . . . You know, eliminate him, you know, into any kind of a conspiracy or what have you." The attorney wanted to know more about the offer of money. Loisel answered: "I would venture to say . . . Well, I'm, you know . . . fairly certain we could put $3,000 on him." He snapped his fingers. "Just like that, you know."

Loisel was asked about the promise of a job. "I don't know," the burly cop said. "I'm sure he would have to go up through the ranks, you know. The first year or two he might stay in a room in the back with the charts or something . . . I don't know. Then he advances a little farther. Then he's a co-pilot . . . Then he's a pilot." Beaubouef's lawyer asked if this was Garrison's idea, if "the boss" meant Jim Garrison? Loisel replied that it did.

Then Loisel laid out the "conspiracy plot" to which Beaubouef presumably would testify. He discussed "cross fire" and escape routes. As Loisel "recalled" it, Ferrie and Shaw had been arguing in the apartment—or maybe it had been Oswald and Shaw—the investigator couldn't quite recall for sure. Loisel added: "Clay Shaw wanted some of his methods used, or his thoughts, you know, used. But anyway, that's what we have in mind—along that line."

Suggestion: "Was Al at the meeting?" the attorney asked. Loisel said: "No, Al wasn't at the meeting." But Loisel suggested that Dave Ferrie had told Beaubouef all about it. The attorney then asked how they would explain Beaubouef's failure to come forward prior to this. "I'll tell you how we go about that problem," said Loisel. "Well, Dave Ferrie, bless his soul, is gone. Al was scared of Dave. Al has a family, you know. When Al first met Dave, he was a single man. Al has a family now. Al was threatened by Dave, you know, to never divulge this. Al or his family would be taken care of. You understand. Now that poor Dave is gone, Al has voluntarily come forth and told of his knowledge. I mean there's 99,999 ways we can skin that cat, you know. I mean, it's something, you know

. . . That's his patriotic duty . . . He's placing his family, you know, at the mercy of the D.A.'s office because he must clear his conscience . . . and as an upstanding citizen."

'Check Back': Beaubouef told Loisel that he really knew nothing about any plot concerning Ferrie or the assassination. But he offered to take the "truth serum," hypnotism, polygraph tests, anything. He had one question. Would they still give him the job if he turned out to be of no help to them? Loisel said: "I'll have to check back with the boss."

When the D.A.'s men learned that the meeting in the attorney's office had been recorded on tape, Loisel and a colleague returned to threaten Beaubouef. He was told if he got in the way he would be shot. Then they hauled him down to the courthouse and made him sign a statement that said, in effect, that he didn't consider the offer of $3,000 and a job as a bribe. They told him bluntly that they had "enough on him" to ruin him. Today, with a wife, an 11-month-old son and a job, Beaubouef is as worried about the existence of some pictures the D.A. holds over his head as he is about physical harm.

So it goes in New Orleans, where several sit on the hot seat while Garrison thrashes around for "evidence" to implicate them and keep himself in the headlines. In the latest wrinkle last week the district attorney brought into his investigation two men named Oswald (Julius J. and William S.) whose only connection with the assassination seemed to be that they worked at a New Orleans coffee company that once employed Lee Harvey Oswald.

Composite Conspirator: In the beginning, Garrison theorized that Lee Harvey was an anti-Castro agent whose original mission was to kill the Cuban dictator. When Oswald could not get to Cuba, the D.A. charged, the plot "turned around" and the plotters (angered over the Bay of Pigs fiasco) set up Oswald in the Kennedy killing. But Garrison's theory has undergone so many permutations that his composite conspirator now would probably be equal parts Oswald, homosexual, right-wing extremist, FBI agent, Cosa Nostra hood, CIA operative and Russian double agent.

There is still some feeling in New Orleans that Big Jim must have something. But now that the facts of the real "conspiracy" are beginning to emerge there, Garrison seems to be losing his confidence. He is having trouble sleeping, and he says that a hired "torpedo" from Havana is stalking him.

The real question in New Orleans is no longer whether Garrison has "solved" the assassination. The question is how long the people of the city and the nation's press will allow this travesty of justice to continue.

Newsweek, May 15, 1967